

Luminance and the moralization of black women's luxury consumption in South Africa

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The Luminance boutique, opened in 2013 in the ultra-exclusive Hyde Park Corner mall in Johannesburg, aims to provide those women who can afford it the opportunity to “live life beautifully” by partaking of a “world class shopping experience with an African appeal” (Luminance Online 2015a). On its website, Luminance also describes itself as an “accessible luxury and contemporary fashion and lifestyle department store for consumers who covet world-class quality and beauty” (Luminance Online 2015a). To walk into Luminance is indeed to partake in the finest of luxury retail, to indulge and to pamper oneself, from the store's plush carpets and gently perfumed air, to its glistening displays of the loftiest brands of Western fashion. The brain-child of black South African businesswoman and media mogul, Khanyi Dhlomo, the store's opening echoed contemporary narratives of black economic empowerment in South Africa, which proclaim that post-apartheid South Africa has become a space in which black excellence is both recognised and rewarded, and in which black mobility is possible. Luminance was framed as a space in and through which black women especially were entering into what, in South Africa, was previously a white world of both luxury consumption and luxury retail. It was reported at the time that Dhlomo and her mother were the majority shareholders in the business, while the minority stake was shared between private investors, staff, and the black rural women employed to produce some of the merchandise (Pillay 2013). Majority ownership has since been transferred to Dr. Judy Dlamini, one of South Africa's most successful black businesswomen (City Press 2014).

Luminance's opening did not go unremarked upon in South African popular and media discourse. Some saw the endowment granted to the boutique by the National Empowerment Fund (NEF) as an unfair diversion of government funds from the many South Africans economically disenfranchised in ways that Dhlomo, an already successful entrepreneur, was not (City Press 2013a). Other critiques ranged from disapproval of what many considered the store's exorbitant prices, to outright scepticism about the transformative potential of a space that could be accessed by so few South African women, regardless of colour (Pillay 2013). This said nothing of the criticism directed towards the NEF itself for funding a project that, at face value, appeared to do little in the way of improving black empowerment (City Press 2013b). In fact, it was the intense media scrutiny of Dhlomo – an elite black woman in a still racially divided and sexist society – that piqued the research from which this chapter derives, which sought to explore what Luminance represents and possibly effects in the post-apartheid context (Alweendo 2016). This chapter examines the meanings and politics of the exclusive boutique as a space for a new kind of black women in South Africa to live out new ideas of cosmopolitan lifestyle and luxury. The chapter is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven black women in Johannesburg aged between 21 and 36, three of whom were regular customers at Luminance, and four of whom had shopped there once. It also draws on newspaper coverage of the boutique, published remarks by its owners, and the store's website.

The chapter argues that Luminance represents an ‘arrival’ for black South African women, more specifically an arrival at consumerist and seemingly carefree self-making via what is branded the finest in global luxury. The store marks a stark departure from not only the severe burdens placed upon black women by apartheid, but from continued, implicit expectations and demands for them to assume a gendered responsibility for the general upliftment of the black community. Nthabiseng Motsemme (2002) notes that, caught between the double oppression of racism and patriarchy, some black women in South Africa choose “to assume consciously supportive and secondary roles that do not challenge black men’s power” (2002: 649). As such, the spaces in which black women’s participation is deemed most acceptable and welcome are predominantly private, communal and domestic. For women in patriarchal societies, their value is directly connected to how well they “adhere to the expectations of domesticity” (Gqola 2013: 57).

By contrast, the heuristic figure that we call ‘the Luminance woman’, that is, the type of black woman for whom shopping at the store is not only desirable but feasible, is an increasingly individualist subject. We understand and approach ‘figures’ as material and semiotic, thoroughly historicized and contested, social types (e.g. see Gqola 2016; Tyler 2008). They emerge in particular socio-political contexts. The Luminance woman emerges and circulates within, and contributes to, dominant neoliberal narratives of what individual hard work and determination can deliver in the ‘new South Africa.’ Indeed, she is a type of “new South Africa woman,” which Pumla Gqola conceptualises as a highly corporatised and glamourised figure of feminine agency and freedom, and an embodiment of “women’s empowerment, but not necessarily feminism” (2016: 123). Simidele Dosekun (2015) elsewhere makes a case for thinking of this kind of class-privileged, new African feminine subject as “postfeminist,” in the sense of seemingly beyond or post- the need for feminism as politics. Keenly attuned to the limitations of the Luminance woman’s brand of empowerment, but also recognizing that she disrupts historical forms and sites of racist exclusion and elitism in South Africa, the chapter draws on Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) to propose a critical view of Luminance as a “crooked room,” a structurally unequal and imbalanced space in which black women attempt to stand.

Bringing the ‘world-class’ home

Luxury is a complex concept to pin down because it is by definition relative. At a literal level, luxury refers to that which is non-essential, to something desired rather than truly needed. However, part of what has made the luxury goods industry so successful has been its ability to transform the desired into perceived need (Kovesi 2015). Luxury consumption is also about assigning symbolic meaning to goods, rendering them not only symbols of wealth and status but also signifiers of the wearer’s personality and taste, and of her ability to access a world of exclusivity and superior craftsmanship (Shipman 2004; Heine 2010; Featherstone 2014; Wierzbica 2015). At Luminance, luxury means the most well-known and well-regarded European and, to a lesser extent, American brands. Accordingly, luxury derives almost exclusively from the metropolises most associated with ‘high fashion’: Paris, Milan, London, New York, and so on. As Agnès Rocamora explains, for example, “in the realm of fashion, France and, in particular, ‘Paris’ are highly loaded signs, synonymous with fashionability,

elegance... and the ‘good taste’ which grants one the sense of distinction on which luxury thrives” (2016: 208).

That the Luminance woman is well-acquainted with places like Paris came up repeatedly in the interviews. Painting a descriptive picture of this woman, Palesa¹ ventured:

[S]he’s somebody who’s very crazy about travel, crazy about experiencing new things, and who, who’s seen a bit of the world, you know, and who’s probably seen a bit, or a lot of the world. So you can’t lie to her about what you’re giving to her [i.e. in Luminance], she’s seen it in Milan, she’s seen it, in, in, Paris, she’s seen it in New York and she just wants it here too at home, you know...

Lerato echoed the notion that the reason why the Luminance woman could “assess the value of the brand” was because she was “well-travelled.” According to Dhlomo herself, it was her own global travel and exposure that led her to found the store in the first place, perceiving, from abroad, a gap in the South African marketplace:

It’s a venture I’ve been thinking about for at least ten years, it started when I was living in Paris as Head of South African Tourism. And really from just walking around and taking in the retail experiences, the brands, the labels, how people shop, it dawned on me that none of that really existed in South Africa” (SABC 3 Top Billing 2013)

African brands are in short supply in Luminance, by contrast. Stoned Cherrie, a brand that claims to represent the latest and best in South African fashion, was originally in the line-up of suitably high-quality local lines to be stocked at Luminance, if with the caveat that it would “take time” for a set of exclusive designs to be made available (Pillay 2013). Three years later, while a smattering of South African designers have made the cut, the brand remains absent on the boutique’s roster of designers (Luminance Online, 2015a). Stoned Cherrie, whose look “is often described as distinctively ‘African’” (Vincent 2007: 82), is just one of many high-fashion South African labels that have emerged in the post-apartheid era to cater to a new generation of black South Africans determined to unapologetically (re)embrace their blackness and Africanity, and to style themselves as simultaneously local and global (e.g. see Motsemme 2003; Nuttall 2004; Vincent 2007). Nthabiseng Motsemme describes them as seeking “to liberate black female bodies from their histories of oppression to a stylised freedom” (2003: 57). Yet despite the way black South African elites have chosen to embrace such brands, comments made by Luminance’s new owner, Judy Dlamini, continue to reinforce an imagined distinction between the ultimate calibre of the foreign versus homegrown:

This year has seen Luminance embrace and welcome on board talented local designers ... Sitting alongside international heavyweights, our local designers have still proved to be a favourite amongst clients in remaining true to their aesthetic and roots (Luminance Online 2015b).

The implication of Dlamini’s remarks praising local designers for ‘still’ being favourites, and able to hold their own against the global heavyweights is that the former would be outclassed ordinarily. Luminance positions itself as a cut above what it constructs as *South*

¹ ¹ All participants are referred to by pseudonyms in the chapter.

African luxury, or *local* standards. ‘Truest’ and also ‘global’ luxury thus remains Western and imported. This strategy of putative ultra-distinction would appear to be successful. One participant described the store appreciatively as “the first of it’s [sic] kind, of that calibre... In terms of the boutique, I’ve never seen anything like that before *in this country*” (emphasis added).

Buying our way in

Consumption practices have been long fraught with meaning for black South Africans. Historically, part of the mechanism of apartheid was the economic disenfranchisement of black people, as the political system distributed wealth, and therefore the sheer material ability to consume, along strict colour lines. Black consumption was also limited by the apartheid state delimiting and aggressively policing black people’s movements, as well as by racist entry and service policies in retail arenas. For instance, department stores in downtown Johannesburg were long reserved for white customers only (Kenny 2015). Deborah Posel (2010) argues that regulating black consumption, and distinguishing it from white consumption, was not incidental to the apartheid project but at its heart. The very “making of the racial order was, in part, a way of regulating people’s aspirations, interests and powers as consumers. The desire and power to consume was racialised, at the same time as it was fundamental in the very making of race” (Posel 2010: 160).

It follows that consumption was an important mode of black resistance to apartheid, including as a way and means for black women and men to continue to find pleasure and exercise agency in their everyday lives (e.g. see Thomas 2008; Johnson 2009; Ferreira 2011; also Madikizela-Mandela 1985). Despite the heavy hand of the apartheid state apparatus, black women were active players in the spheres of fashion and beauty, and neighbourhoods like Sophiatown, in Johannesburg – before its destruction by the state in the late 1950s – were hubs of black creativity and enterprise. Black South Africans also actively breached the consumer and other spaces denied to them. In her autobiographical writings, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (1985), a prominent figure in the anti-apartheid struggle, describes with relish the times when she deliberately entered and disrupted the normative proceedings in shops and other retail arenas in which her race marked her as not belonging (also see Iqani 2015a). Given these histories, as well as the fact that South Africa emerged from apartheid isolationism in the early 1990s into a heightened neoliberal consumerist economic order, it is no surprise that consumption has become an important arena of post-apartheid black self-making and self-representation, and aspiration (Posel 2010; Iqani 2016; Nuttall 2004; Odiahmbo 2008). Consumption has become imbricated with ‘freedom’ and ‘citizenship.’ At a material level, the rise in black consumption is also due to the growth in the black middle and elite classes occasioned by post-apartheid political economic policy.

It is in light of these histories that Luminance represents what we are calling “an arrival” for the black women who can afford to shop there. In popular parlance and as we use it here, ‘to arrive’ is to attain a distinguished and desirable rank or status. It is to reach some promised land finally, and to be recognised and heralded as belonging there. All this means that to arrive is also, evidently, to depart or leave behind some other lesser place or ‘level.’ For the Luminance woman, the store represents an arrival of the highest order because it is an utterly exclusive space and also purports to adhere to the most rarefied of standards

(supposedly rare in South Africa). It represents arrival at not only the privileged socio-economic status required to shop in such a place but also at the level of cosmopolitan discernment to even know how to do so, such as heard earlier in the chapter from interview participants. Thus the Luminance woman has arrived at financial and cultural capital. Arguably, these translate into a certain psychological and embodied 'confidence capital' too. The Luminance woman walks into the store with confidence. She knows that she belongs and is welcome, unlike a black middle class woman like Madikizela-Mandela in the apartheid days, say, whose mere presence disrupted, notwithstanding the fact that she had money to spend. Indeed, the store is now *hers*. Luminance belongs literally to an elite black woman, and remarks by Dhlomo suggest that this was the demographic for whom she founded the store in the first place. As Dhlomo proclaimed, in what can be read as an explicit invitation for black women to now boldly enter the world of luxury, black women have "got to start going into unexpected places" (Pillay 2013).

And yet, in South Africa, when it comes to consumption, lifestyle and other material concerns, black arrival, or what some might still deem "unexpected" black presence, is highly contested and moralized. Mehita Iqani argues that in the global South, middle-class consumption (much less luxury consumption) tends to be moralized "precisely because of the extremes of social inequalities that are [visibly] present" (2016: 32). Black South African consumption is further moralized by being cast as 'new,' a product of 'new money' and 'new values' (Iqani 2017). Terms like 'new money' or 'nouveau riche' are derisive, being associated commonly with values and practices such as 'excessive consumption,' ostentation and 'bad taste' (Bourdieu 1984; see also Smit, this volume). These values and practices are readily racialised. In terms of 'new values,' the counter-reference in the South African context is to the old ideals of the anti-apartheid liberation struggle, and of the African National Congress (ANC), the ruling party since 1994 and home of the erstwhile freedom fighters. If the old values centered on communal black advancement and social and economic justice, or in fact socialism, new, elite black consumption then comes to be seen in some quarters as a 'selling out' (Iqani 2017).

Grappling with the many criticisms levelled at Luminance, which are both indirectly and directly also criticisms of the Luminance woman for participating in the store's values, interview participants ruminated: "Why shouldn't we have nice things? Why can't we indulge every once in a while without feeling guilty?" These rhetorical questions are as much about the past, referencing how far the Luminance woman had come, as about the present, rejecting notions that black women's luxury consumption is necessarily selfish and frivolous, especially because the larger black community is still mired in poverty. Lerato reasoned:

Even in a society like ours that's so polarised and with inequalities, there are people with cash to spend somewhere... People still have a right to choose, and just because they're rich, doesn't mean they must go and pour all their money [i.e. philanthropically] in Soweto or in the Eastern Cape.

As we continue to elaborate in the following section, participants were of the view that black women who could afford to shop at Luminance had, in multiple senses of the term, *earned* it. Not only did the Luminance woman earn an independent income that she was therefore at liberty to spend, she had paid her dues historically. Having long suffered

oppression and exclusion, having had few avenues to enter the formal economy, she was now free. As Amanda put it:

It was really important [for Luminance to] have a black face. Black people, especially black women don't want to be known as nurses and social workers anymore. I mean, we have proper career goals and it also just shows that you can have a business in fashion. You can run a fashion business in the country, and not just be a designer or be an intern at a runway show.

The woman who shopped at Luminance represented a step, or several steps, forward for black women who had grown up seeing their mothers, aunts and grandmothers denied access not only to luxury but to the kind of jobs that would allow them to even dream of it. Her arrival was also at the right to self-prioritize therefore, or what Lerato termed "the right to choose" in the quote above. According to Palesa, the Luminance woman was an individualist subject: "somebody who likes distinction, she likes standing out from the crowd... she's not just any individual, she's an extraordinary and an exceptional individual, you know?" Now individually empowered (Dosekun forthcoming), now individually exceptional, she did not owe any apologies for this.

Don't burn it down, strive to also stand

Reflecting on the fact that shopping at Luminance is neither materially possible nor designed for everyone, interview participants reasoned that this was just in the order of things. Lerato reflected: "As much [as my] instinct would be to change the prices so everyone can afford [Luminance], then it kills what the brand is for, right?" In the words of another participant: "I think that they didn't create a brand that was for everybody, that was for every, for [just] anyone, which was intentional." The women were referring here to the "logic of exclusion that fuels luxury," without which the luxury brand or space fails to have meaning or distinction, and is therefore no longer luxury (Rocamora 2016: 216). In this line of thinking, the fact that Luminance was not for everyone and the Luminance woman not 'everywoman' served instead to render both *aspirational*. The store became a space to which the currently excluded would also want to arrive, and the Luminance woman stood as an exhortation to other black women to strive hard like she had or did, so that they could one day get to where she was:

If the rest of us can't afford it, you mustn't be angry and wanna burn the shop down [laughs]. We must work harder... I guess when you shop there you'll feel like, 'I have arrived' type of thing so I guess it will motivate you to [think] 'why can't I shop there.'

Nandi's above remarks gestured towards the spectre of popular black anger and disenchantment about the continued inequalities of the post-apartheid socio-economic and institutional landscape. In recent years, this has manifested increasingly in mass protest, and has begun to implicate the black ruling class (e.g. see Alexander 2010; Gibson 2017). Nandi's taking up of rhetorics of 'aspiration' and 'self-motivation' served to depoliticize this anger, however, and to propose that a better or more fruitful direction of black energies was to "work harder". The solution to structural exclusion became not collective movement or redress, but individual and internalized effort.

Participants also rejected suggestions, including by Luminance itself, that the existence and success of the boutique would or could actively empower currently disempowered black women. Lerato stated: “In my view and in my mind, again, I know [Luminance is] not about woman empowerment, it’s about high-end fashion. And there’s a place for it anywhere.” Nthabiseng spoke on this theme at some length:

I struggled to draw the connections between how that business and that, that strategy [Dhlomo] said at the time was going to empower or change a black woman’s life who’s sitting in Soweto and can’t even shop in that shop. So when I broke through and went through all of it, and filtered it to make sense for myself, I came to the conclusion that it is a *business*, at the end of the day (original emphasis).

Luminance did not have to empower under-privileged women, or even claim or intend to, to be justifiable or legitimate. While the boutique’s origin story included a certain pride that it created a platform for less privileged black entrepreneurs, it was not obliged to have a higher and communal black purpose. It was a business, profit-driven “at the end of the day,” and there was room for this in South Africa. Hence, as Nthabiseng went on to say about the business owner: “She has to make money. And who is she gonna take care of? The women who walks *in*, with the card, with the money. Now, when we’re doing that, don’t tell me that’s now bringing change or transformation to women. It’s a business transaction like any other.” Via care and attention to her moneyed customers, the black businesswoman’s ultimate care, attention and responsibility were to her bottom line, *not post-apartheid transformation*.

Continuing an individualist and celebratory framing of the Luminance woman, the foregoing remarks by Lerato and Nthabiseng could be critiqued for seeming to evade any notion that the new black South African woman has even corporate social responsibilities, much less more substantive or radical ones. The Luminance woman is an exemplary neoliberal subject, interpellated and swayed by “rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a micro-economic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality (Brown 2003: n.p.). Yet the picture becomes more complicated if we consider, alternately, that what the research participants were rejecting was that black South African women have a particular responsibility, a black feminine one, to empower and uplift others around them. Black women themselves, they were rejecting what would amount to yet another intersectional burden placed upon black women, yet another “boulder” for them to push against, to cite Nomboniso Gasa’s (2007: 150) metaphor for the continuous struggle in which black women engaged under apartheid and during the political transition not just for themselves but for the nation as a whole. We can revisit in this vein the earlier-cited plaint: “Why can’t we also have nice things?” Rather than hear this question as selfish, materialistic or grasping, we can consider that what it was asking was: ‘why can’t *someone else* make the requisite sacrifices? why must it still be *us*?’

While far from transformative, falling as it does squarely within the ideological and moral bounds of neoliberal consumer capitalism, for black women in South Africa to assert an unapologetic, individualist right to not only consume but in the case of Luminance also trade in and profit from luxury *is* political. The slant or skew of both South Africa’s past and present renders it so. Melissa Harris-Perry suggests in reference to the ways in which black women in America are forced to contort themselves in order to negotiate their place in

society that their struggle is akin to attempting to “stand up straight in a crooked room” (2011: 29). As Harris-Perry (2011) formulates it, the crooked room refers to the world of dehumanising and distorting stereotypes that black women face, to which they must constantly rise and respond. We find it productive to borrow and extend Harris-Perry’s (2011) conceptual metaphor, however, to think of Luminance as a kind of crooked room itself for black South African women. Luminance is a crooked room in the sense that it is founded upon several compounded layers of structural inequality and imbalance: the elitism of the sheer concepts and practices of luxury consumption and branding; the boutique’s insistent sourcing and importing of the so-called best in sophistication, glamour and style from the West; its ownership and business structures that, while now black and female at the top, are still corporate and accumulative, and likely exploitative at base. Some of the exclusive brands to be found in the store are alleged to engage in exploitative labour practices in their global South factories, for instance (e.g. see Rocamora 2016).

Thinking of Luminance as a crooked room is also productive to understand, and to make allowance for, what such a space tends to do. Citing experimental studies in the field of cognitive psychology, Harris-Perry (2011) notes the finding that, when placed in rooms and around objects that are quite literally crooked, people reorient themselves to, or get their bearings from, these things. In other words, people come to “figure out which way is up” (Harris-Perry 2011: 29) in relation to their surroundings, and in this way may end up unwittingly positioning themselves aslant, too. If elite black women in South Africa today are invested in luxury consumption, if they desire and find pleasure in high and exclusive style, and furthermore ardently defend their right to, it is because this is the predominant way of the world into which they have arrived as now-materially privileged subjects. This is how they come to stand in the crooked room in which they are positioned and interpellated. Our point here is not to denude black women of agency, as if they cannot help themselves. Much like the interview participants cited in the chapter, our aim is rather to reject *moralized* judgements of black women’s luxury consumption in South Africa. Designed to keep black women in their – our – ‘proper place,’ these judgements are racist and/or sexist, and disciplinary, and so must be resisted and critiqued.

Conclusion

In South Africa and beyond, in societies that perceive themselves as increasingly inclusive and tolerant, black women’s practices and representations of self remain subject to particular gendered and racialised scrutiny, and moralised judgement. Among many other factors, the heightened scrutiny of what black women get up to and prioritise is due to the fact that they are not seen as individualized subjects, as women who might think of themselves only or first. Rather black women tend to be fixed in communal and relational terms and frames, as subjects who have particular matriarchal and/or filial responsibilities toward their communities; subjects who should be dutiful, then. Their responsibilities are to not only represent but uplift; to pass on whatever ‘empowerment’ they may have gained themselves; to sacrifice and put their needs as well as *wants* second to those of others. At the same time, as this chapter has also shown, black consumption, both women’s and men’s, is a fraught and highly politicized terrain in post-apartheid South Africa, implicating struggles over taste, both national and global belonging and citizenship, and putative racial authenticity.

It is in these intersecting, deeply historicised contexts that a hyper-elite, luxury boutique like Luminance becomes a complex, even charged space to read from a black and African feminist perspective. While some might simply celebrate the existence of the space and its black female clientele as representing the break down or surmounting of long-entrenched intersectional barriers, we would suggest that this is not enough. Even for black South African women long denied access, luxury consumption does not add up to a radical or transformative politics, and neither do the neoliberal visions and constructs of 'empowerment' – black economic empowerment and women's empowerment – that have dominated official discourse and development programming in the country since 1994. By conceptualizing Luminance in terms of arrival, we have sought in this chapter to critically if briefly reflect upon how it is that elite black South African women have got to where they are, and where and how exactly this place is. Moralizing their luxury consumption, we argue, constitutes not only a continued symbolic and ideological violence against black women. It also diverts critical focus from the structural and cultural conditions that invite their luxurious and luminous practices of self in the first place, and that continue to make unjust the spaces in which they are invited to enter and stand crooked.

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